

Dear Senator Shirkey,

My name is Phalesha Kyes and I am the Office Administrator at West Michigan Partnership for Children (WMPC) and I am also someone with lived experience in the Kent County foster care system.

Being a person with lived experience prior to the creation of WMPC, I can speak to the unnecessary added trauma that children experience in the foster care system after the traumatic removal from our parents. When my three sisters and I were removed, we were placed in a shelter and then eventually separated. We never had an advocate or someone working consistently with us through the process. We had multiple caseworkers, counselors, and placements.

Our journey left a deep scar on who we are today. Most people will never have to experience the feeling of waking up in your own bed, getting ready for school as if it were any other normal day, never to return home again. Most people will never have to experience the feeling of complete abandonment, time-stopping fear, and utter confusion as to what's going on in their own lives. We did. For a year-and-a-half, we lived with uncertainty as strangers came in and out of our lives.

As an adult working in the insurance business, after I learned about WMPC and the flexibility and innovation they were implementing to change the foster care system, I knew I had to be a part of the organization. WMPC's focus on reducing the number of placements a child has to endure, their advocacy towards keeping sibling groups together, and passion behind recruiting foster parents in high removal zip codes so children can stay in their communities, schools, and near friends is so important. If only we had that type of fierce advocacy-- my sisters and I may have never been separated, may have stayed in our community, which likely would have reduced the trauma we experienced.

I don't think anyone will truly understand the importance of the work WMPC is doing without having gone through the system; but if you can, for one second, put yourself in the shoes of a scared child, eager for stability and comfort, you will understand the importance of the incredible changes WMPC is making to the foster care system. You will understand the importance of restoring the funding to ensure WMPC can continue to create better outcomes for children and families.

Sincerely,

Phalesha Kyes  
Office Administrator and Advocate for Foster Youth  
West Michigan Partnership for Children